

New farmers' market looks to change root of eating habits



By Jayne Gest, Staff Writer
Dover Post
Tue Jun 30, 2009

Dover, Del. -

Only one in five Delaware adults eat the amount of fruits and vegetables they should, but a new Wednesday Farmers' Market on Legislative Mall in Dover is hoping to help change that.

Michelle Eichinger, who works in Delaware Public Health and is the state's fruit and vegetable coordinator, said the idea is to assist local farmers in selling their produce and help the local economy while getting customers to eat healthier and live better.

The market is open to the public from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesdays, July 1 to Sept. 16, although state employees are likely to be the main customers.

However, this isn't a typical farmers' market, she said.

The market, which will have only fruits and vegetables for sale, has a uniquely educational side to it, Eichinger said. The state is the largest employer in Delaware so the idea is to target that population and see if fruit and vegetable consumption changes.

She sent out a survey in April to state employees about their fruit and vegetable buying and eating habits and received 9,000 responses that she's still tabulating. In December or January, she'll send out another survey and see if there's any change, using non-Dover state employees as a control group.

The percentage of Delaware adults eating the right amount of fruit and vegetables has remained approximately 22% for about three decades, Eichinger said.

“People seem to know they need to eat more fruits and vegetables, but don’t do it,” she said. “I’m hoping with a farmers’ market right on their back door, they will get something on their lunch hour.”

Working together

Eichinger got the idea from looking around at other states that have held farmers’ markets near their state capital.

“I said, ‘If they can do that in Texas, in Iowa, we can certainly do it here,’” she said.

In fact, now those other states are watching Delaware closely because typically only the number of attendees and vendors is tabulated, not behavior.

Eichinger found multiple partners from the First State Heritage Park at Dover to the Department of Agriculture to University of Delaware Cooperative Extension to make the market a reality.

“It was a win, win, win for all of us,” she explained.

With many of the sponsors facing tight budgets, they’ve worked together and leveraged off existing program resources, Eichinger said. The First State Heritage Park helped advertise and the city of Dover waived some license fees, while the state’s DelaWELL program sent emails to state employees and others are helping some farmers transport produce to the market.

Another atypical part of the market is if farmers find it difficult to leave their farms during the week, 4-H clubs will staff the booths.

“We have these children interested in the agriculture business and here’s an opportunity for them to be mentored,” Eichinger said. “This is the future of the business.”

Markets increasing across state

The new market isn’t the only farmers’ market in Dover, however. Delaware State University has held one on Saturdays during the summer for three years now. Nancy Wagner of DSU said the market is very informal with no pre-registration or fee of any kind.

“We have regulars that come all the time,” she said. “People just show up on Saturday morning and they’re welcome to sell their tomatoes.”

After a few years, the crowds and sales have increased as word of mouth has gone around, Wagner said.

“This is the kind of thing people have to get used to coming to,” she said.

Farmers’ markets popularity have increased in leaps and bounds throughout all of Delaware, said Kelli Steele, marketing communications officer at the Delaware Department of Agriculture. Since she was hired three and a half years ago, the number of Delaware farmers’ markets has

gone from three to 15, which she feels is the peak for a state of Delaware's size.

"They are doing phenomenally," she said. "You'd never know there is a recession."

She saw people waiting in line for an hour for peaches and fresh bread at the Bethany Beach market June 28, a behavior she thinks is due to the fact that people want to know where their food comes from.

"If they are going to spend any money at all — whether it be five cents or \$5 — they want to know it's fresh and it came from a local vendor," Steele said.

In her experience, Steele added, a successful farmers' market needs to have the community behind it and a good location, which is certainly the case for the new Dover market.

David Marvel of the Fruit & Vegetables Growers Association also has seen the results of the new markets' popularity. The Delaware market share from farmers' markets increased from \$450,000 in 2007 to \$798,000 in 2008, which he called quite a big jump.

Farmers' markets not only help the local economy, allowing smaller and family farmers to increase their market share, but also decrease the number of miles food has to travel and saves energy, he said. In addition, they allow children of family farms to find a transitional role and make farms more profitable per acre.

As awareness of farmers' markets increase, it doesn't just help the fresh produce farmers, but also the important industry of farmers who grow lima beans, sweet corn and cucumbers for pickles that will be canned or frozen, Marvel added.

"As consumption of fresh fruits and vegetable increase also frozen, canned or jarred vegetable consumption goes up," he said. "It doesn't go against each other."

Email Jayne Gest at jayne.gest@doverpost.com

If you go...

What: Legislative Mall Farmers' Market

When: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesdays, July 1 to Sept. 16

Where: Legislative Mall, Dover

Admission: Free

Information: Call Michelle Eichinger at 744-1011